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MARCION OF SYNOPE'S RELEVANCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD VIS-À-VIS RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

Marcion of Synope has long been considered a heretic by all Christian churches. He is frequently grouped with the Gnostic trends of Early Christianity, although this is not entirely accurate. While he made a handsome financial contribution to the Church of Rome, he was eventually excommunicated. Yet, even if his doctrines can seem extravagant, contradictory, alien to modern values, and even anti-Semitic, his theology is relevant in our contemporary world because of the ever-growing threat of religious violence and fundamentalism. In his attempt to cleanse Christianity of its Jewish elements, Marcion set the bases for a critique of the cult to a violent God and the divine inspirations of violence. Marcion believed that the Old Testament God (Yahweh) was, in fact, the same as the creator or the material world, from which we must escape. He contrasted that God's violent deeds with the peaceful nature and character of the New Testament God.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York City, historians, sociologists and politicians agree that a religious awakening is currently taking place, which, unfortunately, is also leading to religious violence from all three monotheistic faiths.

Scholars raise the question as to what is the origin of this religious fundamentalism that ultimately leads to violence? We must not lose sight of religion in explaining this phenomenon.

It would be a mistake to believe that religion is merely a circumstantial cause of this type of violence. The way in which specific religions represent God has deep implications in terms of how much religious violence occurs as a result thereof. The theologian Barbagglio (1992:5) explains:

> It is well known that religious symbols influence the codes of behavior, to the point that a religious community will keep some homogeneity to its God; if the community believes its God is violent, even if it is for noble and just causes, then the community itself will be violent.

As such, the worship of a violent God usually inspires more religious violence than the worship of a peaceful God.

One would expect contemporary groups that appeal to religion to justify violent actions to attribute a violent trait to their God. This violence could either be mundane (God intervenes in history to carry out the violence), or eschatological (God waits for the end times to carry out violence as punishment). The same God may order violence by means of rigorous laws, or may exhort military campaigns. It is debatable whether the sacred books of Judaism, Christianity and Islam represent a violent God. It appears that some images of a violent deity occur in the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, and the Qur'an. Yet, the main difference is how the texts are interpreted.

Given all the religious violence taking place in many parts of the world at present, it is wise to consider the legacy of an obscure character from the 2nd century CE, Marcion of Synope. Christianity views him as one of the greatest heretics; yet, his philosophical and theological concerns have become especially relevant at a time when the violent image of God is reappearing. Nowadays, Marcion is remembered as an author who engendered a theological and philosophical system that was too extravagant, if not contradictory. But, at the same time, he was one of the first Christian authors to consider the problem of a violent God and, by extension, the violence that such an image inspires. As opposed to many of the contemporary religious fanatics who are willing to kill in the name of God, Marcion was not willing to worship a deity that commands genocides, punishes severely, and imposes rigid laws.

Marcion tried to conceive a variant of Christianity that would not worship a violent God. To do so, he excluded from his religion the deep Jewish legacy of the Christian religion. Although Marcion defended many religious ideas that are currently deplored, he at least attempted to dissociate the sacred from violence; this is very relevant in our contemporary society, which is plagued by religious violence. This article addresses the problem of divine violence as one of the prime motives for the historical rise of

Marcionism, and how this theological system, although widely considered as heretical, could make a meaningful contribution to world peace.

2. THE LIFE AND WORKS OF MARCION

Marcion is an obscure historical character. Even if he was well known in his time and wrote works that were widely distributed, none of these works have survived. All we know about him derives from references by Irenaeus, Epiphanius, Hippolytus, Eusebius, Ephraim, and, above all, Tertullian. These authors' representation of Marcion is not altogether reliable, because they evidently wrote against him, and could not overcome their bias. Nevertheless, historians have been able to reconstruct the life and work of Marcion.

Marcion was born in approximately 110 CE, in Synope, a city in the Pontus area. Apparently, he was the son of the bishop of Pontus, and came from a wealthy family. Young Marcion began to work in the sailing and shipping business, and accumulated great wealth (Von Harnack 1901).

According to one story, young Marcion pledged to lead an ascetic and chaste life, but he sinned with a virgin. Consequently, his father, the bishop of Pontus, excommunicated him from the Church. Young Marcion tried to reconcile with his father and to be readmitted as a member, but his father refused. Marcion fled from Synope.

The vast majority of historians believe that this story is not reliable, because Marcion had a very strict and genuine morality. The story, as told by Epiphanius (XLII, ii), seems to be either a typical accusation coming from a detractor, or some confusion coming from Epiphanius himself. More than the literal seduction of a virgin, the tradition seems to express that, with his heresy, Marcion seduced the Church (allegorically, pure as a virgin), and was expelled because of his heresy.

Be that as it may, the fact is that Marcion abandoned Sinope and established himself in Rome, probably in 140 CE. For some time, Marcion was part of the Roman Church, to which he made a significant financial contribution. Eventually, Marcion met the presbyters of the Roman Church to discuss some doctrinal and exegetical issues. This meeting led to a major disagreement, with Marcion threatening that, if his doctrine was not accepted, he would instigate a schism. His doctrine was not accepted, and alas, Marcion carried out his threat; he organized his own church. According to the vast majority of historians, Marcion's church had as many members as the rest of the churches in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries CE.

After breaking up with the rest of the Christians, Marcion probably returned to Asia Minor, and began an intense proselytizing campaign. This was a success, not only demographically, but also geographically, as his Church covered territories from Persia to North Africa, including Italy, Asia Minor, and Greece. It is not known where and when Marcion died. He remained an obscure figure after his death, but his churches were widely distributed, until they eventually disappeared in the 5th century. Although Marcion generated opposition from many authors, and the overwhelming majority of Christian denominations rejected his doctrine, he was never formally declared a heretic, as he lived prior to the Council of Nicaea (325 CE). Post this date, the church was sufficiently institutionalized to officially decree specific doctrines as heretical.

The vast majority of authors believe that Marcion was part of what historians vaguely call "Gnosticism" (Stephens 2016). Roughly speaking, Gnosticism was a heterogeneous set of popular beliefs during the first centuries of Christianity, according to which human beings have sparkles of divine souls trapped in material bodies, created by an imperfect God, frequently called the Demiurge (a name taken from Plato's *Timaeus*). Gnosticism aspired to an escape from material reality towards a supreme spiritual reality, through the nourishing of esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*), held only by some masters of higher learning (the greatest of them all was Jesus), and secretly transmitted. It has been argued that Gnosticism was always a parasite religion of conventional Christianity, as it always defined itself in opposition to conventional Christianity. Inasmuch as it pretended a total escape from the material world and cultivated mystical attitudes, it was mostly apathetic in political terms, and was never organized in institutionalized churches.

However, the celebrated historian of Christianity, Adolf von Harnack (1901:266), emphatically claimed that "Marcion cannot be counted amongst the Gnostics in the strictest sense of the word". Although Marcion's doctrine had some similarities with Gnosticism, there are still relevant differences between Gnostics and Marcionites, to which I shall return.

Marcion's doctrine can be summarized as follows. There is not one God, but rather two Gods. The first God, frequently called Yahweh, but called the Demiurge by Gnostics, is the creator of the material world. This world is intrinsically evil, as all matter is corrupt, according to Marcionite doctrine. Yahweh, whose actions are described in Jewish scriptures, is not absolutely evil, as opposed to, say, Satan. Yahweh is above all a legalistic, rigorous and severe God, willing to punish sins with violence. In the Marcionite understanding, this rigour, although well-meaning, eventually leads to evil, as the deity winds up far from the elevated concepts of love and forgiveness.

The counterpart to Yahweh is a good God, wholly spiritual and totally disconnected from the corrupted matter created by Yahweh. This God sent Christ, a wholly spiritual and nonmaterial being, to teach human beings the path to escape from the material world created by Yahweh, and whose death atoned for the sins of humanity.

We may thus assume that Marcion's doctrine was dualist. First, it resembles Persian dualism, which teaches that there are two opposed divine principles, good and evil. Secondly, this religious dualism also synchronizes with a Platonic metaphysical dualism between spirit and matter. In Marcion's doctrine, the material world is attributed to the evil God, whereas the spiritual world is attributed to the good God.

But, the dualism of Marcionism goes beyond that. Marcion also had two corpuses of sacred scriptures. Each set of scriptures would correspond to each of the Gods. The first corpus of scripture reveres the evil God who created the material world. This corpus of scriptures is the Hebrew Bible. Thus, the evil God is Yahweh, the God worshipped by Jews, and whose story is told in the *Tanakh*. The good God is the spiritual being that sent Christ to the world to show the path to escape from the material and evil world created by the God worshipped by Jews. The corpus of scripture that worships this God consists of documents that refer to Christ, but omit any reference to the God of the Jews.

Marcion is thus the first figure in the history of Christianity to form a canon of scriptures, even before the Church selected the writings which it considered to be divinely revealed. Up to Marcion's time, the many texts that were in circulation would later make up the Christian Bible, but there were also apocryphal books in circulation. Most of the documents that make up the Old Testament in its current form had already been compiled in one single corpus (the Hebrew Bible), but the documents that make up the New Testament, as well as the apocrypha, were still circulating, and there was no consensus about which ones were divinely revealed.

Anticipating the Church, Marcion formed his own canon. Marcion carefully selected documents that did not worship Yahweh, and that adapted well to his religious doctrine (Von Harnack 1901). Thus, he deliberately excluded from his canon all Old Testament books, as he viewed these texts as worshipping the evil God. His canon only included a reduced version of Luke, and the following Pauline letters: Galatians, I and II Corinthians, I and II Thessalonians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. This is the first difference between the Gnostics and Marcion: the former claimed to have an exclusive knowledge only secretly transmitted by some masters, whereas the latter never pretended to have a secret knowledge. Indeed,

Marcion formed a canon for the explicit and exoteric distribution of his religious doctrines. Furthermore, the books included in this canon were also part of the New Testament, and no apocrypha were included.

One of the great stories in the history of Christianity is that, were it not for the Marcionite heresy, there would probably be no canon of the Christian Bible. The church organized its canon, in order to oppose the doctrinal and exegetic pretensions of the Marcionite churches.

The opposition between a good God and an evil God is of Persian origin. Although Marcion lived before the time of Mani (the great Gnostic teacher who divulged his own dualist system in the 3rd century CE), the notion of a good God opposed to an evil God is rather ancient, and was probably present in the Mediterranean world. The opposition between matter and spirit is probably of Hellenistic origin; it was available for Marcion to incorporate in his religious system. But where does the opposition between Judaism and Christianity originate?

The vast majority of historians agree that this opposition comes from the Apostle Paul, or, more accurately, from Marcion's interpretation of Paul's religious ideas. Paul did not really present an opposition between a Jewish God and a Christian God. It is more accurate to say that he put forth an opposition between the law and justification by faith. According to Paul, Jews were given the law, but the time came to transcend it, as a New Covenant was now in place. Paul did not clearly express the value of the law. On the one hand, he exhorted his followers to transcend the law (Rom. 3:20; 6:14-15; 7:16; 8:3; Gal. 2:15-16, 21; 3:10-11, 21; 5:2-4; Eph. 2:8-9), whereas he showed respect and esteem for the law, on the other (Gal. 3:22; 5:14; Rom. 2:12; 3:31; 7:7, 12; 13:8-10; I Cor. 7:19).

The vast majority of interpreters agree that, in addition to putting in opposition the law and justification by faith, Paul did conceive a continuity between them (Thielman 2009). At some point in history, the law fulfilled a mission, but after Christ's atonement was not the time to transcend the law in favour of salvation by divine grace. The relationship between Paul and Judaism is not altogether clear, but, in general terms, we may argue that Paul respected Jewish religious institutions, but only as the means to the ultimate goal, namely faith in Christ.

Marcion took the Pauline doctrine to an extreme; it is most likely that Paul would have rejected such a move. In Marcion's understanding, justification by faith not only transcends, but also opposes the law. According to his doctrine, Judaism is not the means to the ultimate goal (faith in Christ), but it becomes an obstacle itself. Paul had a rather ambivalent attitude towards the law; Marcion was much clearer. In his mind, the law came from

an evil God, and the requirements to meet the law is a way of prolonging the evil and material creation of Yahweh.

As opposed to other dualist systems, Marcion did not attribute absolute evil to Yahweh. He believed that Yahweh was, above all, a just God. But, for Marcion, justice was not an absolute virtue, because every notion of justice implies punishment for the sinner. Divine punishment becomes an evil in itself, as it afflicts the sinner. Thus, the religion of the law (Judaism) is, according to Marcion, the continuity of the work of a legalistic God whose rigorous justice ultimately becomes evil. The law becomes evil, not only because of the punishment it implies, but also because of its intimate connection with material actions. In Marcion's perception, the law regulates material (ritualistic) actions above spiritual actions, and this was unacceptable to him.

Consequently, Marcion was frequently accused of being a forerunner of antisemitism (Gager 1985). This is not entirely fair. Certainly, Marcion contributed to the definite rupture between church and synagogue that had already begun with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. This does not imply, however, that he was anti-Semitic, in the modern sense of the term, and its association with the Holocaust, pogroms, and so on.

Marcion postulated that Christ was sent by the good God to teach the way in which to escape the created material world, and that the worshippers (the Jews) of the God who created matter killed Jesus in order to prevent this escape. This is clearly a forerunner of the accusation against Jews of participating in deicide, which became so frequent in later times. Marcion never advocated persecuting Jews. He did not oppose Jews as an ethnic group; his concern was only with Judaism. To some extent, this makes sense in Marcion's doctrine. This derives from the antinomianism with obvious Pauline precedents.

Marcion should be viewed not only as an anti-Semite, but also as a great spiritual reformer who tried to cleanse the nascent Christian religion from its legalistic roots of Judaism. More than any other author in early Christianity, Marcion conceived of a wholly spiritual religion that did away with mundane norms; under his interpretation, this was only possible by rejecting the Jewish legacy.

Nevertheless, Marcionites did not completely discard rituals. They still performed baptism, oil anointing and a variant of the Eucharist (Tertullian 1972:I, 14). As part of his anti-Judaism programme, Marcion ordered his disciples to work and fast on the Sabbath to show their hostility to Yahweh, who had instituted Sabbath in the law. Furthermore, Marcion did not include the whole New Testament in his canon, because he carefully excluded

all documents that may presume a link between Judaism and Christianity, especially the paraphrasing of the Old Testament in the New Testament.

One of the great paradoxes of Marcionism derives from the fact that, although Marcion was intensely antinomianist, he imposed on his community a rigorous morality and organizational structure (with hierarchy and internal rules), requiring the compliance with very strict rules. Most of the historians of Christianity believe that the Marcionite churches anteceded conventional churches in the proper organizing of religious communities (Moll 2010). Marcion's past as tradesman and proprietor of ships was a major tool in the organization of his religious community. Another great irony in the history of Christianity is that Marcion's undisputed talent for communal organization urged the rest of the Christians to improve their ecclesiastical organization in order to counter the Marcionite threat. It would be no exaggeration to mention that, had Marcion not been around, the Church would not have the level of organization and institutionalization it has at present.

This is another aspect that differentiates Marcion from the Gnostics. Whereas Gnostics were politically apathetic (coherent with their dismay for the material world), Marcion established an ecclesial organization, without being too concerned by the obvious contradiction of his religious doctrines and the organizing principles of his communities.

Another great paradox of Marcionism concerns its eschatology. As mentioned earlier, according to Marcion, the good God is spiritual, whereas the evil God is the creator of the material world. In this sense, the good God sent Christ to the world, and with his sacrifice and atonement, the good God took the good people in his favour, and turned them away from the evil God. Inasmuch as Christ was sent by the spiritual God and was wholly linked to him, he never had a corporeal presence. In fact, according to Marcion, Jesus was *not* the Messiah, for the very notion of Messiah was a Jewish concept that Marcion rejected.

Thus, according to Marcion, Christ had no birth or infancy. Rather, he appeared as a spirit with the semblance of an adult. Marcion was careful enough to omit the birth and infancy narratives of Jesus in the Gospel according to Luke. In this regard, Marcion had a docetic understanding of Christ: he was a wholly spiritual being, only with the appearance of being corporeal. Marcion also rejected the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, and consistent with his doctrinal system, he posited that salvation is achieved by escaping from the material world, and only the spirit is immortal. Yet, Marcion never seemed to come to terms with a theological issue that was frequently poked by his critics: how could Christ save humanity with his death, if he had no corporeal substance that would have allowed him to die?

According to Marcion's eschatology, in his descent to Hell, Christ did not rescue the just people whose stories are told in the Old Testament (as they worshipped Yahweh); Christ only rescued sinners who had disobeyed God the Creator (Irenaeus 2014:I, 27.3). Thus, Marcion did not believe that the Old Testament contains prophecies about the coming of Christ, because Christ and the Messiah are not the same.

There is yet another twist in Marcionite eschatology. As mentioned earlier, Marcion thought of Yahweh as a legalistic and violent deity, whereas the spiritual God (the one who sent Christ) is pure love. Yet, if this doctrine is taken to its logical extreme, it leads to apocatastasis, the religious notion that salvation is universal and that all the sinners and the pious will be saved, as the good God does not punish. Let us recall that Marcion values mercy above justice. But, strangely, Marcion rejected the doctrine of apocatastasis. In his view, although the good God does not punish, he abandons sinners in the hands of the punitive legalistic God. But, is this abandonment not a form of punishment itself? Marcion never considered this question.

Marcion's religious views, therefore, were a rather inconsistent set of doctrines. He has frequently been labelled as a hellenizer of Christianity (Tripolitis 2002:132). In fact, Hellenistic rationalism is lacking in his doctrinal system. Marcion was a wealthy man who managed to build a schismatic sect during the early times of Christianity, but he was not a sophisticated author, as opposed to, say, Origen, Tertullian, or Augustine. Marcion's doctrine also leads to a mysticism that borders on the nihilistic; it requests withdrawing from the world, and it is convinced that we live in an intrinsically evil world. All of this is the opposite of modern mentality. Yet, Marcion's doctrine is still relevant to the modern world, in terms of the worship of a violent God, and the implications for religious violence.

3. VIOLENT GOD VS. PEACEFUL GOD

Perhaps the world's staunchest atheist, Richard Dawkins (2006:31), wrote:

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

This description of Yahweh is surely a caricature. But, as is usually the case, this caricature is based upon a kernel of truth. Stories about God's capricious violence in the Old Testament are well known: the Flood, Sodom

and Gomorrah, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, the killing of the firstborn in Egypt, the conquest of Canaan, punishment of Israel with pestilences, and so on. Likewise, Yahweh's violence is continuously exalted in lyrical sections of the Old Testament, such as Deborah's Song, and many of the Psalms. Yahweh is sometimes referred to as "Yahweh Sabbaoth" (God of the Armies), a very militaristic allusion. Prophetic literature also refers to the coming of the "Day of Yahweh", an expectation that God will come one day and inflict horrible violence.

It is, therefore, not necessary to read the Old Testament in great depth, in order to understand how prominently Yahweh is portrayed as a deity that uses violence as a favourite resource. It is not difficult to understand how such a deity can inspire religious violence. Contemporary Jews view the texts that make up the Old Testament as sacred, and violent Jewish fundamentalists have hardly any problem in finding inspiration for their violent acts, when reading their scriptures. It is an interesting fact that violent Christian fundamentalists appeal more to the Old Testament than to the New Testament, as far as legitimating their violent actions is concerned. Although Muslims are not prone to accepting it, it is also a fact that a significant portion of the Qur'an derives from Jewish scriptures, and as a result, Yahweh's violence also resounds in the Muslim conception of God.

Contemporary pacifists, whether religious or not, are worried by the inspiration that Jewish and Christian fundamentalist groups find in the Old Testament. Modern sensitivity makes it difficult to accept that religious communities worship a deity that supports genocidal conquest, makes firstborn children die, or kills those who make a minor mistake in an obsessive ritual. A good God, suitable of worship by critics of religious violence, cannot be the same God who is willing to commit atrocities. If barbaric violence is rejected, then the worship of a God who orders barbaric violence should also be rejected.

As mentioned earlier, Marcion conceived of a doctrinal system that led to some inconsistencies, and in that sense, his rationalism was fairly limited. But critics of contemporary religious violence may have an important pioneer in Marcion. Marcion's great rationalistic contribution points out that it is not possible for a critic of religious violence to worship a God as violent as Yahweh. Marcion can thus be considered an important reformer of ethical monotheism. Is the God represented in the Old Testament truly ethical? According to Marcion, the answer is an emphatic "no". This requires some caveats. But, even if Marcion exaggerated in his ethical judgement about Yahweh's violence, Marcion simply extended to Christianity the same ethical and rationalist critiques that many Greek authors had levelled against their gods.

In that sense, for Marcion, the violent God of the Old Testament could not be the same good God that must be worshipped. Many critics of Christianity point out the dual character of God as represented in the Bible. The same God that punishes mercilessly and orders genocides, made himself into a man in order to die for humanity, as a profound gesture of love. Barbaglio's description of this strange situation is very pertinent:

> it is still true that, in Ancient Israel's history as well as in Jesus', and also in the history of Early Christianity, the divine image presents a bifrontal God, a duplicate of Janus [the god with two faces] in Roman mythology, that gives life and death, that rewards and punishes, condemns and forgives (Barbaglio 1992:17).

To state that violent Yahweh of the Old Testament is the same loving deity who is represented in New Testament parables such as the Prodigal Son inevitably leads to great inconsistency.

The solution that many Biblical scholars present is to argue that the Jewish understanding of God was gradually modified into a more peaceful and loving deity. Some theologians suggest that God has progressively revealed truths (Kaiser 1991:60). However, this is hard to reconcile with an absolute notion of God, which supposes his eternity and unchanging nature. In this critical endeavour, Marcion can be appreciated as a forerunner of a religious rationalism that points out the inconsistency of a God who orders genocides, and simultaneously admits sinners in his Kingdom.

Marcion never truly considered that Yahweh was a false God and that Jews were wrong in attributing violent characteristics to the deity. On the contrary, Marcion remained close to Persian dualism, and, in that sense, he claimed that Yahweh was not an inexistent or false God, but rather an evil God. His solution to the problem of the bifrontal God is much simpler: God is not inconsistent, but rather, there are, in fact, two Gods.

To prove that the violent God of the Old Testament cannot be the same as the loving God who sent Jesus for our salvation, Marcion wrote the *Antithesis.* This work was lost, but historians have been able to work some reconstructions thereof (Lieu 2015:346). It is most likely that the *Antithesis* was a juxtaposition in two columns (perhaps with commentaries) of Old Testament passages, contrasted with texts from Marcion's canon. This juxtaposition would prove the contradictions between one column and the other. Most of these juxtapositions tried to contrast a violent God with a peaceful God.

It is most likely that the first juxtaposition in the *Antithesis* was between Luke 6:43-44 and Isaiah 45:7. The first passage is as follows:

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. [44]Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briers". The second passage is as follows: "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things". Marcion interpreted that, if Yahweh is capable of doing this, then this God cannot be the same God announced by Christ, for Jesus himself claimed that no good tree bears bad fruit. Departing from these passages, which were the nucleus of his discussion with Rome's presbyters, Marcion developed the rest of the *Antithesis.*

Contemporary critics question the ethical character of the God of the Old Testament. Fundamentalists do not seem to be too concerned with these critiques, as they unconditionally accept the violent inclinations of the deity as represented by their doctrines. As mentioned earlier, this instigates religious violence. In fairness, the vast majority of Jews, Christians and Muslims reject religious violence. Yet, Jews do worship God as represented in the Hebrew Bible, and Christians do consider that the God of the Old Testament is the same God of the New Testament. How, then, can Jews and Christians reconcile what, for Marcion, was impossible to reconcile? How can Jews and Christians have peaceful lives and reject violence, and yet, worship a God who, according to their own doctrines, ordered genocide and other heinous crimes?

Even in Marcion's time, some of his opponents attempted to answer this question, and some of these answers remain popular nowadays. One answer appeals to an allegorical interpretation of scriptures. Whereas Marcion seemed to be bent towards a literal interpretation of scriptures, Origen was the great promoter of an allegorical reading of the Old Testament (Martens 2012). Under this interpretation, the Bible does not necessarily narrate literal events, but rather, on occasions, the narrated events are allegories to teach a religious message with a symbolic language.

This provides a solution to the problem of the Biblical stories, in which God is capriciously violent. In this case, the stories about divine violence are not literal; they are, in fact, allegories to divulge some teaching. Thus, the Flood is simply a story about human beings' disobedience; the narrative about the conquest of Canaan and the sanctioning of war are merely allegorical ways of expressing our struggles against sin, and so on.

While allegorical interpretations serve the commendable purpose of restraining interpretations that may warrant religious violence, it does seem naïve. In many Biblical stories (some of which have to do with violence), the authors clearly had a literal intention. Ironically, a growing number of historians and archaeologists believe that many of the stories

in the Old Testament (at least those prior to David) are purely legends (Liveriani 2005). In that sense, it is highly unlikely that there was a conquest of Canaan or the genocides described in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, it is very likely that the authors of these stories did interpret them as literal events, and wanted to transmit the idea that God's violence was real and literal (Finkelstein & Silberman 2002).

Furthermore, allegorical interpretation soon becomes a double-edged sword for many of the faithful. A skeptic may very well ask: How do we decide which events are allegories and which are literal? Origen and contemporary Christian defenders of allegorical readings may consider that the speaking donkey in the story of Balaam is allegorical, but they certainly would not admit that Christ's resurrection is allegorical.

Allegorical interpretations can also be objected on the grounds that, even admitting that Biblical stories about divine violence are merely allegorical, why have they been expressed in such an aggressive language? Is it not possible to transmit the same religious message without having to recur to such frightening descriptions of God's violence? Ever since Sapir's (1921) work, contemporary linguists admit that the use and selection of metaphors reveal a great deal about the cultural contents and intentions of the authors of the text. A text deeply embedded with violent metaphors and allegories still holds violent intentions. Thus, even while conceding that divine violence in the Old Testament is merely allegorical, it is still true that the intention of the scribes has some association with the sublimation of violence.

Not every contemporary Jew or Christian is likely to accept an allegorical interpretation in order to solve the problem of divine violence in the Old Testament. Some consider that the violence described in the texts is effectively literal. Given the circumstances of the context, God was in a legitimate position to use that violence; however, they claim that such violence would no longer be excusable nowadays (Copan & Flanagan 2014).

Marcion considered that a truly good God could not be punitive. A just God, such as Yahweh, would punish sinners. Marcion, however, believed that justice was associated with mundane things and the material world, and as a result, justice was also part of evil. In Marcion's doctrine, a good God such as the one announced by Christ would forgive and would not inflict pain on anyone. Marcion's teaching implies that a good God would never find motives to do violence, regardless of how grave the sins. No sin can legitimate the violent actions of the God of the Old Testament.

Those interpreters who posit that, in those circumstances, God's violence was legitimate do not seem to read the Biblical text closely enough. For, on multiple occasions, Yahweh punishes disproportionally, and even

innocent victims are punished. At any rate, those interpretations pave the way for fundamentalists who believe that, if God annihilated the Canaanites, there is also the right to annihilate infidels, all with God's approval.

Tertullian, the greatest opponent of Marcion, objected to the pacifist representation of God on which Marcion elaborated. As mentioned earlier, for Marcion, the good God would be incapable of an outburst of wrath, and punish sinners. Tertullian opposed this, arguing that, on the contrary, a good God would be just, and that, in order to rescue the innocent, God must punish and show his wrath against sinners. In Tertullian's (1972:I, 26) words:

> … if he is not jealous and wrathful, if He does not hurt or harm … I do not understand how discipline can have any meaning.

Lactantius (2015), another early Christian author, expressed similar views in his major work, *De Ira Dei*. According to Lactantius, a good father does not peacefully ignore the naughtiness of the child, but rather, for the purpose of discipline, inflicts pain as punishment. In that sense, if God really cares about human beings, he must punish sins, for whoever loves good hates evil, and whoever does not hate evil, does not love good.

Thus, Tertullian believed that, because of God's love for humanity, he must incur violence. Yet, this is not a solution to the problem of divine violence in the Old Testament, for, as mentioned earlier, there are many passages in which divine punishments are not proportional to the sins of those who are punished. Yet, the doctrinal clash between Marcion and Tertullian reveals the tension between a punitive God and a merciful God, and this tension still persists in Christianity. For, even if Tertullian's doctrine became dominant (God must punish, because of his justice and goodness), in the history of Christianity, various groups have defended the doctrine of apocatastasis (Gould 2016).

None of these exegetical efforts are fully satisfactory for those Jews and Christians who are disturbed by contemporary religious violence; yet, they subscribe to the canonic status of the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps Marcion was indeed right that, if God is good, then the Old Testament cannot be divinely inspired.

Yet, Marcion did not read the Hebrew Bible closely enough. For, it is after all possible to find, in the Old Testament, instances of a loving God who abhors religious violence, and exalts mercy, not only for Israel, but for all nations.

When it comes to religious violence, one may well consider the Old Testament as a "work in travail", as Girard (1989) labels it. Passages such

as the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, some Psalms, and some sections of the Prophets, among others, represent God more as the compassionate deity that is more prominent in the New Testament. Perhaps, after all, Marcion was indeed somewhat of an anti-Semite, inasmuch as he distorted Judaism as a religion that worships an absolutely violent God. In fact, that is not true. Marcion could not perceive that the peaceful God proclaimed by Christ in the New Testament concludes a process begun in the Old Testament, in which the deity gradually becomes less violent. To have excluded the Old Testament was to ignore this gradual process.

Furthermore, Marcion's representation of the New Testament as wholly merciful and peaceful is not altogether accurate. In many New Testament passages, there seems to be a recurrence to the violent God of the Old Testament. The Book of Revelation is perhaps the most emblematic in this regard. Marcion excluded Revelation from his canon, presumably because he considered it too reminiscent of the intertestamental apocalyptic literature, and of books from the Hebrew Bible, such as Daniel.

Some of Jesus' apocalyptic sayings also seem to represent a violent deity, willing to carry out terrible punishments. These sayings come from the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, which Marcion may have excluded from his canon, because he read in them these representations of a violent God. But, even within the Marcionite canon, the punitive and violent God is still present. In the Gospel of Luke (the only one included by Marcion), some of Jesus' sayings clearly represent a punitive God, such as in Luke 10:11-15, in which terrible violent events are announced as a prelude to the coming of the Kingdom, and in Luke 19:27, in which God is represented as a master who orders the execution of his enemies.

Thus, Marcion was not entirely accurate and fair in his examination of Jewish and Christian scriptures. As mentioned earlier, although it is extravagant to accuse Marcion of anti-Semitism, he negatively distorted Jewish religion. Marcion should, however, at the same time be credited with having a critical approach to religion, and to a certain extent, antecede the contemporary critique of religious violence. As opposed to the vast majority of the Christians of his time (and of contemporary fundamentalists), Marcion was greatly concerned with the problem of divine violence, and he was one of the first to take the non-violent approach presented in the New Testament seriously. This approach was diminished a great deal after Constantine's conversion.

Despite many of its extravagant doctrines, Marcionism is still relevant to 21st-century religiosity. During an epoch, in which violent images of God resurface, Marcionism may teach the faithful that a good God would not

provide divine inspiration for acts of violence. Marcion is considered a heretic within Christianity. From a secular perspective, it is not my duty to decide whether or not Marcion's doctrines are wrong. But his doctrine does have a considerable heuristic value in our times. It provides a solid basis for the critique of religious violence. This critique is useful not only for Jews and Christians (inasmuch as they viewed the Hebrew Bible as revealed scripture), but also for all religious systems that represent a violent God, and as a result, are more prone to sanctioning religious violence.

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